

Edited from ITD Press Release 9-2-09 Written by Jo O'Connor, Safe Routes to School Coordinator

“Hang up the phone, especially in a school zone!”

That reminder comes as schools across Idaho resume for another year. Jo O'Conner, Safe Routes to School coordinator for the Idaho Transportation Department, urges motorists to focus on driving and children around school zones, not on cell phones and text messaging.

One out of every six drivers in school zones behaves like a drunk driver according to a new report from Safe Kids USA. The leading cause of distraction in school zones is talking, dialing or texting on a cell phone. According to the report using a phone while driving poses a risk similar to that of a drunk driver. Safe Kids researchers observed more than 40,000 drivers in school zones at arrival and departure time. Afternoon drivers, unbelted drivers and drivers travelling in high volume traffic were more likely to be distracted, and females were 21 percent more likely to be distracted than males. The study also quotes research from the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute that estimates drivers are at six times greater risk of crashing when talking on a cell phone, and at 23 times greater risk when texting.

O'Connor recommends that students who live within walking distance be encouraged to walk, bike or skate to school to help increase safety for everyone. “This study shows that distracted drivers within the school zone are putting kids at risk, particularly at pick-up and drop-off times,” O'Connor says. “Parents who choose not to drive help reduce traffic congestion, reduce air pollution and help make it safer all around for the kids who want to walk or bike to school.” Parents driving children to school contribute to 25 per cent of morning traffic congestion according to NHTSA.

“Teaching kids the skills they need to get to school safely will help them be more independent; it helps them build life-long habits of being physically active; and it helps children become more aware of their environment,” O'Connor adds.

Students who are more physically active do better at school and have fewer discipline problems according to the National Center for Safe Routes to School. Walking and biking to school is becoming a more popular choice for Idaho students. Participation in International Walk to School Day was up 30 percent last year; this year's walk to school event in Idaho is planned for Oct. 7. The following tips will help children get to school and back home safely:

Bike/skateboard/scooter

Always wear a helmet, no matter how short or long the ride.

Ride on the right facing traffic.

Use appropriate hand signals.

Respect traffic lights and stop signs.

Wear retro reflective material and bright color clothing to increase visibility.

Know the "rules of the road" and teach them that a bike is a vehicle.

Walking to school

Make sure your child's walk to school is on a safe route with well-trained adult crossing guards at busy intersections.

If your child is young or is walking to a new school, walk with them the first week to make sure they know the route and can do it safely.

Bright colored clothing and retro-reflective material will make your child more visible to drivers.

Consider starting a “walking school bus,” in which an adult accompanies a group of neighborhood children walking to school.

Motorists are urged to remember:

The fine for speeding in a school zone is \$141.50.

Failing to yield to a pedestrian in a crosswalk carries a \$75 fine.

Failing to stop for a school bus is a misdemeanor, with a fine between \$100 and \$500.

For more information about the Idaho Safe Routes to School Program go to www.itd.idaho.gov/sr2s and www.walktoschool_usa.org or contact O'Connor by e-mail: joconnor@itd.idaho.gov .